

***Ad hoc* presupposition construction**

Philosophers and linguists have long debated the phenomenon of ‘presupposition’, whereby speakers linguistically mark information as background or taken for granted. This debate has surprisingly left untouched the following two assumptions: (i) presuppositions are not part of what is *intentionally* communicated by the speaker, and (ii) the propositional content of a presupposition is semantically determined. These assumptions are well-established in the literature and they are endorsed even by scholars who offer a ‘pragmatic’ analysis of presuppositions. For instance, with regard to (i), Simons (2007) claims that presuppositions are “not part of the speaker’s communicative intention” and they are transmitted simply as a “by-product”. Or, with regard to (ii), she suggests that the presuppositional content is “calculated, presumably compositionally, on the basis of the content of the trigger plus the rest of the content expressed” (Simons, 2005).

In this paper, we challenge both these assumptions. We argue that presuppositions fall within the scope of ‘ostensive-inferential communication’ (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) and illustrate the benefits of our proposal. Ostensive-inferential communication requires the communicator to display an overt behavior aimed at attracting attention to her communicative intention (‘ostension’). Furthermore, it requires the audience to infer the communicator’s intended meaning (‘inference’).

First, we show that by treating presuppositions as part of what is *ostensively* communicated by the speaker, we can provide a unified account of a variety of presuppositional uses discussed in the literature. This account covers the whole range of cases from noninformative, or ‘common ground’ presuppositions, to informative presuppositions, as well as cases of exploitative presuppositions.

Second, and more importantly, we suggest that by treating presuppositions as the output of an *inferential* process of pragmatic interpretation, we can shed a new light on their context-sensitivity. Traditional accounts of presuppositions view the context-sensitivity of (at least some) presuppositions as pertaining to the question of whether presuppositions are contextually defeasible. This question does not exhaust the relation between presuppositions and context. The propositional content of a presupposition is determined *ad hoc* via a process involving both semantic decoding and pragmatic inference, and involving a ‘mutual parallel adjustment’ (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) among presuppositions, the explicit content and the implicatures of the utterance.

Ostension and inference represent two sides of the same coin and can shed a complementary light on presupposition as a genuinely *communicative* phenomenon.

References

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